

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY

PERCY JOHNSON,

Plaintiff,

v.

CAMDEN COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS,

Defendant.

HONORABLE JEROME B. SIMANDLE

Civil Action

No. 16-cv-08558 (JBS-AMD)

OPINION

APPEARANCES:

Percy Johnson, Plaintiff Pro Se
1219 Liberty Ct.
Burlington, NJ 08106

SIMANDLE, Chief District Judge:

1. Plaintiff Percy Johnson seeks to bring a civil rights complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against the Camden County Department of Corrections ("CCDOC"). Complaint, Docket Entry 1.

2. Section 1915(e)(2) requires a court to review complaints prior to service in cases in which a plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*. The Court must *sua sponte* dismiss any claim that is frivolous, is malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. This action is subject to *sua sponte* screening for dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) because Plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*.

3. For the reasons set forth below, the Court will dismiss the complaint without prejudice for failure to state a claim. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii).

4. To survive *sua sponte* screening for failure to state a claim, the complaint must allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that the claim is facially plausible. *Fowler v. UPMS Shadyside*, 578 F.3d 203, 210 (3d Cir. 2009) (citation omitted). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Fair Wind Sailing, Inc. v. Dempster*, 764 F.3d 303, 308 n.3 (3d Cir. 2014). "[A] pleading that offers 'labels or conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do.'" *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)).

5. Plaintiff brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983¹ for alleged violations of Plaintiff's constitutional rights. In order to set forth a *prima facie* case under § 1983, a

¹ Section 1983 provides: "Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State . . . subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress" 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

plaintiff must show: "(1) a person deprived him of a federal right; and (2) the person who deprived him of that right acted under color of state or territorial law." *Groman v. Twp. of Manalapan*, 47 F.3d 628, 633 (3d Cir. 1995) (citing *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980)).

6. Generally, for purposes of actions under § 1983, "[t]he term 'persons' includes local and state officers acting under color of state law." *Carver v. Foerster*, 102 F.3d 96, 99 (3d Cir. 1996) (citing *Hafer v. Melo*, 502 U.S. 21 (1991)).² To say that a person was "acting under color of state law" means that the defendant in a § 1983 action "exercised power [that the defendant] possessed by virtue of state law and made possible only because the wrongdoer [was] clothed with the authority of state law." *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 49 (1988) (citation omitted). Generally, then, "a public employee acts under color of state law while acting in his official capacity or while exercising his responsibilities pursuant to state law." *Id.* at 50.

7. The facts asserted in the complaint are insufficient to set forth a *prima facie* case under § 1983. Plaintiff alleges

² "Person" is not strictly limited to individuals who are state and local government employees, however. For example, municipalities and other local government units, such as counties, also are considered "persons" for purposes of § 1983. See *Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 690-91 (1978).

he experienced unconstitutional conditions of confinement during confinement at the Camden County Jail. Plaintiff states: "The sheets and the mattresses, felt like we had bed-bugs eating at us and all." Complaint § III. Plaintiff further states that the cells were "definitely unsanitary." *Id.* Plaintiff also alleges that he sustained "no serious injuries." *Id.* § IV. Even accepting these statements as true for screening purposes only, there is not enough factual support for the Court to infer a constitutional violation has occurred.

8. Plaintiff's vague and cursory allegations regarding unsanitary cells and bedding essentially complain "of an inconvenient and uncomfortable situation"; however, "'the Constitution does not mandate comfortable prisons.'" *Carson v. Mulvihill*, 488 F. App'x 554, 560 (3d Cir. 2012) (citing *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 349); see also, *Marnin v. Pinto*, 463 F.2d 583, 584 (3d Cir. 1972) ("blanket statements alleging bad food and miserable living conditions in the prison" were "naked statements [that do not] ordinarily merit Federal court intervention").³

³ Under some circumstances, constitutional violations may arise from unsanitary conditions or conditions that create vermin infestations. See *Drumgo v. Radcliff, Sgt.*, 661 F. App'x 758, 760 (3d Cir. 2016) ("Unsanitary prison conditions may result in [a constitutional] violation.") (citing *Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351, 364 (3d Cir. 1992)); *Kost v. Kozakiewicz*, 1 F.3d 176, 188 (3d Cir. 1993) ("inmates do have a right to be free of conditions that generate infestations of vermin"). However,

9. Moreover, Plaintiff brings this complaint against only the CCDOC. The CCDOC is not independently subject to suit because it is not a separate legal entity from Camden County. See *Bermudez v. Essex Cty. D.O.C.*, No. 12-6035, 2013 WL 1405263, at *5 (D.N.J. Apr. 4, 2013) (citing cases). Plaintiff has not pled sufficient facts to impose liability on Camden County.

10. "There is no *respondeat superior* theory of municipal liability, so a city may not be held vicariously liable under § 1983 for the actions of its agents. Rather, a municipality may be held liable only if its policy or custom is the 'moving force' behind a constitutional violation." *Sanford v. Stiles*, 456 F.3d 298, 314 (3d Cir. 2006) (citing *Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978)). See also, *Collins v. City of Harker Heights*, 503 U.S. 115, 122 (1992) ("The city is not vicariously liable under § 1983 for the constitutional torts of its agents: It is only liable when it can be fairly said that the city itself is the wrongdoer.").

Plaintiff has not alleged enough facts to demonstrate that the conditions complained of, for a pretrial detainee, shock the conscience and thus violate due process rights. See *Hubbard v. Taylor*, 538 F.3d 229, 233 (3d Cir. 2008) (noting due process analysis requires courts to consider whether the totality of the conditions "cause[s] inmates to endure such genuine privations and hardship over an extended period of time, that the adverse conditions become excessive in relation to the purposes assigned to them."). Plaintiff also has not alleged that any person acting under color of state law acted with deliberate indifference in creating or failing to address the allegedly unconstitutional conditions. See *Kost*, 1 F.3 at 188.

11. Plaintiff must plead facts showing that the relevant Camden County policy-makers are "responsible for either the affirmative proclamation of a policy or acquiescence in a well-settled custom." *Bielewicz v. Dubinon*, 915 F.2d 845, 850 (3d Cir. 1990).⁴ In other words, Plaintiff must set forth facts supporting an inference that Camden County itself was the "moving force" behind the alleged constitutional violation. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 689. Plaintiff has made no such allegations.

12. As Plaintiff may be able to amend his complaint to address the deficiencies noted by the Court, the Court shall grant Plaintiff leave to amend the complaint within 30 days of the date of this order.

13. Plaintiff should note that when an amended complaint is filed, the original complaint no longer performs any function in the case and cannot be utilized to cure defects in the amended complaint, unless the relevant portion is specifically incorporated in the new complaint. 6 Wright, Miller & Kane, Federal Practice and Procedure 1476 (2d ed. 1990) (footnotes

⁴ "Policy is made when a decisionmaker possess[ing] final authority to establish municipal policy with respect to the action issues an official proclamation, policy, or edict. Government custom can be demonstrated by showing that a given course of conduct, although not specifically endorsed or authorized by law, is so well-settled and permanent as virtually to constitute law." *Kirkland v. DiLeo*, 581 F. App'x 111, 118 (3d Cir. 2014) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (alteration in original).

omitted). An amended complaint may adopt some or all of the allegations in the original complaint, but the identification of the particular allegations to be adopted must be clear and explicit. *Id.* To avoid confusion, the safer course is to file an amended complaint that is complete in itself.⁵ *Id.*

14. For the reasons stated above, the complaint is dismissed without prejudice for failure to state a claim. The Court will reopen the matter in the event Plaintiff files an amended complaint within the time allotted by the Court.

15. An appropriate order follows.

May 31, 2017

Date

s/ Jerome B. Simandle

JEROME B. SIMANDLE

Chief U.S. District Judge

⁵ The amended complaint shall be subject to screening prior to service.